



Epistemology, Ethics, and Society in Islamic Thought: A Comparative Analysis of Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali

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Abstract

Al-Ghazali (1058–1111 CE) and Ibn Sina (980–1037 CE), renowned as "Al-Ghazel" and "Avicenna" in the West, exemplify Islam's exaltation of knowledge as a path to divine proximity, as emphasized in Surah Al-Baqarah (2:30–39), Surah Al-Alaq, and the Prophet's hadith on seeking knowledge. Despite divergent eras and approaches—Ibn Sina's Aristotelian rationalism versus Al-Ghazali's Sufi-infused mysticism—both scholars intertwined philosophy with Islamic theology.

Ibn Sina's epistemology posits knowledge as emanation from the Pure Intellect (God), accessed via syllogistic reasoning and divine inspiration, enabling the rational soul to grasp universals. Al-Ghazali prioritizes certitude (ilm al-yaqiniyy) through sense, reason, and divine light (nur), critiquing philosophy in works like Tahafut al-Falasifa. On human nature, Ibn Sina divides the soul into vegetative, animal, and rational faculties, advocating rational moral governance; Al-Ghazali delineates nafs, qalb, ruh, and aql, urging heart purification amid fitrah's innate goodness. Both affirm societal interdependence under divine law, with Ibn Sina emphasizing specialized cooperation under prophetic legislation and Al-Ghazali stratifying society into commoners, scholars, and rulers.

This paper analyzes these convergences (e.g., intellect's primacy, early education's role, ummah unity) and divergences (rationalism vs. revelation), underscoring their embodiment of Islam's intellectual quest.

Key word: Ibn Sina. Al-Ghazali, Philosophy, Education, Ilm ul Kalam

Introduction:

Al Ghazali and Ibn Sina were two of the most distinguished and prominent Muslim scholars of all the time. Despite the fact they lived in different era. Their intellectual ingenuity and prolific scholarly contributions gained them a respectable position not only in the Muslim world but also in the West. This was the reason they were known in the west by the name of "Avicenna" and "Al Ghazel". Their exuberance and zest for knowledge was so profound and unparalleled to any of the contemporary scholars of their time. It was their strong love and honest commitment for the search of knowledge

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that provided them the endless motivation to produce their most exceptional works. We all know that Knowledge is placed at the greatest pinnacle in Islam. So it is very necessary to conceptualize the knowledge in the context of Islam in order to appreciate the work of both of these Scholars. In Islam knowledge is the media to know the ultimate reality, to strength the conviction and devotion to the divine power. It is a means for man to fulfil his responsibility in conducting his worldly affairs, which consequently leads him closer to Almighty. So it can be discern that Islamic perspective the multitude knowledge possess one ultimate aim which is to know the eternal creator. Surah Baqrah verse 30-39 illustrate a very important discussion between Almighty and Adam in which Almighty has highlighted three important lessons for Muslim. Firstly, He illustrated the significance of the teaching and learning process whereby He was the teacher and Adam was the student; secondly, the knowledge on the 'names of things' which Allah has bestowed Adam has given him dignity over those who were ignorant; and thirdly, the element of knowledge in the 'names of things'. Apart from this the first revelation to Prophet Muhammad of Surah Alaq clearly accentuate the injunction for Muslim to read and empower themselves with knowledge. And also a hadith from Prophet Muhammad "seeking knowledge is obligatory on every Muslim". In Islam the quest for knowledge is not only to seek for physical, emotional and mental engagement but more importantly it also involve the spiritual commitment, which is to seek to know the ultimate. Importance of knowledge in Islam is also emphasized because it is through knowledge human can proximate with Almighty.

Despite some fundamental differences in their approaches. In my opinion, Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali were two Muslim scholars par excellence who embodied the true essence of the spirit of intellectual quest as promulgated by Islam. They both held the view that Islam and knowledge are strictly intertwined. So in this paper it is an attempt to investigate the similarity and difference in their philosophical views.

Ibn Sina

Ibn Sina was born in the village of Bukhara named Afshana in the year 980 AD. One of the most renowned Islamic Scholar who contributed enormously to Islamic civilization. His full name was Abu Ali al-Hussain Ibn Abdallah Ibn Sina. His inquisition towards scientific investigation is carved from his early age by the intellectual setting of his own family. His father, Abdullah Ibn Ali Ibn Sina was one of the governors serving the Samanid Dynasty. He himself was a very learned and scholarly figure who appreciated intellectual debates and discourses which were commonly held in the vicinity of his house. After the discussion is over Ibn Sina never cease to seek clarification on the issue which he could not understand. It is from these discussions that Ibn Sina gain Impetuous of inquiry and contributed enormously to the Muslim world. Apart from this his father was also concerned about his education. He studied Arabic from Abu Bakar Ahmad b. Muhammad al-Barqi al-Khwarizmi, he attended the school of Mahmud As Massa to study Philosophy, geometry and Indian Mathematics. His teacher, Abu Abdullah Al-Natli, was the one who introduced him with Aristotle^{1,2}.

Abbasid Caliphate became fruitful for Ibn Sina because of its promotion for the quest of philosophical and scientific knowledge³. His acquaintance with Amir Nuh ibn Mansur (976-997) has enabled him to gain admission to the royal library. Thus, his

access to the Prince's library provided him a wonderful opportunity to enjoy the wealth and treasure of knowledge particularly the works of Aristotle⁴. Among his major contributions were *Al-Qanun fial-Tibb* (The Canon of Medicine) a very systematic and comprehensive book on medicine; and *Kitab al-Shifa* (The Book of Healing) his voluminous work on philosophy, mathematics, logic, natural sciences, psychology, geometry, astronomy, arithmetic and music. Others were *Kitabal-hasil wa'l-mahsul* dealing with various sciences, *Kitab al-majmu* on mathematics and *Kitab al-birrwa'l-ithm* on ethics⁵.

He passed away on a Friday in the month of Ramadhan in 1037 C.E. after suffering from colic and was buried in Hamadan.

Al-Ghazali

Abu Hamid Mohammad ibn Muhammad Al-Ghazali was born in 1058 AD near Tus in the vicinity of Khorasan, just twenty-one year after the death of Ibn Sina, into an ordinary family whose father was a wool spinner. From his early age he was exposed to Sufism because his father was traditional Sufi. After his father's death he and his younger brother were placed under a Sufi, friend of his father. At the age of twenty-three he went to Nishapur to study in Nizamiyyah in Baghdad under the guidance of a famous scholar Abul Maali Juwayni. And after the death of his teacher he was appointed as the head professor by the then vizier Nizam al-Mulk. In 1095, due to a 'spiritual crisis', he abandoned his career at Nizamiyyah and left Baghdad for Damascus⁶. The intricacy of this internal struggle and spiritual search for peremptory knowledge during the crisis was well deliberated in a book *Munkidh Min al-Dalal* "Deliverance from Error" where he mentioned that the crisis was resolved by "a light which God Most High caused to penetrate into my heart the light which illuminates the threshold of all knowledge. Which lead him to reject all material wealth and fame and live a life of a Sufi⁷.

He was titled as *Hujjatul Islam* because of his vigorous stand to protect the sacredness of Islam. One can observe this nature in him because during his time the Islamic knowledge was very much tainted with alien elements due to its exposure and encounter with various foreign cultures such as the Greeks and Hellenistic philosophy. Hence, this became a major reason for him to write "*ihya ulum al-deen*" The Revival of the Religious Sciences⁸. This voluminous piece is divided into four categories, the Acts of Worship, the Usages of Life, the Destructive Matters of Life and the Saving Matters of Life⁹. Other major works which were aimed at defending Islam were *Maqasid al Falasifa* (Aims of the Philosophers), *Tahafut al-Falasifa* (The Incoherence of the Philosophers), *Bidayat al- Hidayah* (The Beginning of Guidance) and *Jawahir al-Quran* (The Jewels of the Quran)¹⁰. This distinguished philosopher-cum-jurist passed away on December 1111 AD.

Philosophical bedrock of Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali

Thought on knowledge

Ibn Sina following the path of Aristotle said that human soul differ from Animal soul because it has the ability to conceptualise the intelligible. Through the rational soul or also known as 'material intellect' or potential intellect. He maintained that the intelligible emanated from the Pure Intellect (God), who is the principle of existence

and the object of human knowledge. The soul with rational ability capture the intelligible in two ways, divine inspiration and syllogistic reasoning. Syllogistic reasoning entails the provision of proof (*burhan*) which can be achieved by utilizing logic (the conceptualization of logical truths); physics (verification of physical matters); mathematics and metaphysics¹¹. Ibn Sina argue that this method is the most effective due to intelligible nature which demands a syllogistic structure in comprehending their interconnectedness. And on the contrary, Divine inspiration does not necessitate the use of senses for it involves *a priori* intelligible or primary beliefs such as a ‘whole is greater than part’ or that two contrasting elements cannot be present in a single entity simultaneously¹².

Al-Ghazali’s pursuit in the search for certitude or *ilm al-yaqiniyy* has led him to investigate three sources of knowledge namely sense perceptions, necessary principles or reason and divine illumination, he also argue that there is difference in thinking ability between human and animal in that the former possesses rational discernment which is crucial in generating knowledge while the latter due to the lack of it relies purely on its instinctive nature¹³, Al-Ghazali says that our sense perception do possess some doubt and may deceive us such as the size of concrete object like Sun and Star. And he consider something above than reason, if appeared, would convict reason falsehood, just as reason has confuted us. And he ascribed this third source “To the light “*nur*” which God caused to penetrate into my heart. The light which illuminates the threshold of all knowledge”. This divine light was bestowed on him through the path of Sufism¹⁴.

Thought on Man and Morality

Ibn Sina propounded that every human being is an amalgamation of three fundamental elements: bodies (*jism*), souls (*nafs*) and intelligences (*aql*). He explained that body is composed of two essential element, the hidden (*sirr*) and the open (*alin*). *Sirr* refers to the human mental powers while *alin* encompasses the *jasad* or tangible body at the exterior and the internal parts which are revealed via anatomy¹⁵. Ibn Sina’s concept of the soul is the reflection of the Aristotle’s concept where he ramified it into three distinctive categories: vegetative, animal and rational souls. The qualities of the vegetative faculties are shared by both humans and plants and these qualities engulf the basic needs of growth, nutrition and reproduction¹⁶. The second category is of the animal soul which places humans together with the animals but differentiates them from plants. It divides human into mobility and immobility. The functions of mobility are to motivate humans to achieve the things they desire and to shun dangerous and harmful elements through instinctive reaction and rational movement. And on the contrary, immobility helps to achieve comprehension and sense perception through the external senses (five senses) and internal senses (common sense), memory, imagination and conceptual imagination¹⁷. The third category is the one which distinguishes humans from animals and it is called intelligence. It is the most significant category that guides humans’ physical and intellectual conduct through its practical and speculative nature. Ibn Sina held that every person possesses the innate potential of being good or bad with all the inherent varied faculties in a human being. And his nature is depend upon the element he is exposed to, In this regard he stressed that if a person is exposed to evil

influence then it is required by him to identify its opposite element and compel himself to achieve it. And should make it a part of his soul because perhaps in certain situation he may losses it where he required it the most. When a man reaches this stage in his moral upbringing, he can be considered as an ethical person. He also stated that “human being must prepare for his soul both reward and punishment, and govern it thereby.” In this statement he was urging human beings to achieve high moral standards in their lives by guarding their actions through their reasoning and if they divert from the right path, they must punish their souls. It is seen in the idea of Ibn Sina that he is inclined toward a rational man for a moral conduct as he says reason to be used for moral conduct in human^{18,19}.

Al Ghazali propounded that the self encompasses four different entities. nafs (soul), qalb (heart), roh (spirit) and aql (intellect). He further expounded that the nafs (soul) are divided into four different types which are vegetative, animal, human and universal souls. Each of these souls has its own unique characteristics in that the animal soul possesses the quality of sense perception which is lacking in the vegetative soul, but it is devoid of intellect which is a part of the universal soul. The human soul, however, possesses both the intellect and the thinking faculty which enables it to make choices and act accordingly²⁰. Al-Ghazali too highlighted that human being is endowed with four different types of internal qualities: animal, ferocious, demoniacal and angelic qualities. According to him, which ever qualities that is supreme in an individual's make up will be translated into his or her behaviour. Al Ghazali urged humans to identify “what qualities predominate their character, and in the predominance of which your true happiness consists. Al-Ghazali also stressed that these qualities are closely intertwined with one's soul or heart or spirit. He mentioned that God has graced humans with body and spirit or heart. The body is just a vehicle where the heart reigns supreme. It is thus the responsibility of humans to cleanse the heart and purify the soul so that the body will translate it into admirable behaviours which will elevate them closer to God. And in relation to *fitra* Al-Ghazali state that human is almost neutral but more likely inclined toward good²¹.

Al-Ghazali says that, at the initial stage, parents are the one make the biggest impact on the children for they are the first source of knowledge where children learn about their cultures, values, customs and traditions. The second most influential authority are the teachers who are responsible in conveying knowledge and shaping the thinking of the learners²². He clearly stated this in *Tahafut al-Falasifah* “in this universe lives man, a creature with an immortal soul and a mortal body. Man is neither good nor evil by nature, although his natural disposition is closer to good than to evil. Furthermore, he operates within a constrained framework, with in which there is more compulsion than freedom of choice. He is not so much meant for this world, in which he toils, as for the hereafter, which he must aspire to and strive to achieve. Thus, it is imperative that humans must always purify their souls for the “soul is like a clean mirror, into which whenever a person looks, he may there see God^{23,24}.

Thought on society

Ibn Sina highlighted that it is impossible for human to live in isolation because of the inherent interdependency among its members. He stressed that society can exist by

mutual cooperation of human. Human beings depend on each other in ensuring their survival, in fulfilling their needs and in accomplishing their educational goals. This interdependency in a society requires that each member must be highly specialized in different crafts and skills so that they will be able to contribute essentially to the development and progress of the society. And such cooperation among human should be followed through some guidelines. Inability to do so will lead towards chaos and anarchy. Thus, in order to achieve this harmony, it is imperative that the society be governed by a leader. Ibn Sina delineated the duty of a leader and those are to implement the principles of the law, wherever there is a text, and he is an independent interpreter (ijtihad) who consults people in authority where there is no text. And in choosing a leader the qualities are that, who stands out from the others, which ensure that his word is obeyed and the whole people follow him. The crux of Ibn Sina's, as one can discern, system of governance lies in the principle that "the whole society must submit to the righteous holy law of God through the Prophet who legislates it, guided by divine revelation"²⁵.

Al-Ghazali, like Ibn Sina, also indicated the importance of 'togetherness' in a society for "The existence of the individual is insignificant compared with the existence and strength of the group. Though he (Al-Ghazali) divided the society into three distinct parts. The first group, which is the biggest, is the commoners. These are the people who are incapable to grasp the concept of truth due to their incompetence or their indulgence in worldly affairs. As a result, they merely obey the dictates of the rulers. Next are the scholars who are involved in handling matters pertaining to religion and theology, while the elite are the rulers who are responsible on issues related to the governance of the State"²⁶.

Conclusion

Both Ibn Sina and Al-Ghazali Upon realizing the delicate and pure nature of a child's mind and soul, as mentioned above that all human beings are born neither good nor bad but rather 'upon the natural disposition' or *fitrah*, and in regard to this a hadith of *Sahih Muslim* is related "The mother of every person gives him birth according to his true nature (*fitrah*). It is subsequently his parents who make him a Jew or a Christian or a Magian. Had his parents been Muslim, he would also remain a Muslim", both philosophers stressed the importance of early childhood education. Which will inculcate in them correct ethics at a tender age and shape their individual characters. Both of them highlighted that the crucial difference between human and animal as humans are equipped with intellect or intelligence which enables them to analyse, synthesise and comprehend universal concepts through the rational souls. Which is almost impossible for animals. Besides that, both scholars shared a common perception on the concept of society that it should be constructed based on the divine law whose main aim is to pledge obedience to the Almighty. They emphasized cooperation and togetherness and between them due to the indisputable and interdependency which is critical in creating a strong Ummah. In the realm of knowledge, both of the scholars held knowledge in high esteem. Though they diverted from each other based on different epistemology and orientation. Ibn Sina applied a more rationalistic approach in elucidating knowledge due to the influences of the Greek philosophy particularly

Aristotle. Al-Ghazali, on the other hand, through his mystical orientation gave greater prominence on revelation such as the Al-Quran and Sunnah. Ibn Sina as a Neo-Platonist philosopher held to the theory of emanation and that knowledge too is a form of emanation from the Pure Intellect (God). This is reflective of Ibn Sina's attempt at reconciling philosophy with religion. Al-Ghazali in relation to knowledge based the principle of Al-Quran and Sunnah which is most evident in his voluminous composition of *Ihya Ulum al-Din*.

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